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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined (1) which partner in a romantic relationship typically said the initial "I love you"; (2) reasons for making that first declaration; and (3) the partner's communication responses to such statements. In the first study, 100 undergraduate students at a large eastern university were interviewed, while the second study surveyed 100 other undergraduates, both studies asking their subjects to reflect back on such an utterance in a heterosexual relationship. Results indicated that males typically said "I love you" first and their motivation included sharing true feelings, attempts at secondary gains, comforting behavior, and sheer confusion. It was also found that this expression was usually pre-planned and ultimately seemed to have a positive impact on the relationship, though different expressions of the sentiment carried different weights, and a diverse pattern of receiver-reaction was evident. (Twenty-two references and five tables of data are attached.) (SR)

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Expressions of Love as Communication Strategies: Source, Functions, and Receiver Response

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Abstract

This paper is a cumulation of two research projects. They investigated which partner in a romantic relationship typically said the initial "I love you," why it was said, and the partner's communication responses to such utterances. Results indicated that males typically said "I love you" first and their motivations included sharing true feelings, attempts at secondary gains, comforting behavior, and sheer confusion. It was also found that this expression was usually pre-planned and ultimately seemed to have a positive impact on the relationship.

Expressions of Love as Communication Strategies: Source, Functions, and Receiver Response

The mystique of love is evident in literature, movies, magazines, and the music of our time. Almost every human being, whether married or single, young or old, spends great amounts of energy and money in the pursuit of love. Yet even with the importance placed on being loved by another, the communication of such an emotion is not fully understood.

One of the most critical points of a growing relationship is the utterance of the first "I love you" (Owen, 1987). This initial declaration is thought to change the tone and often direction of the relationship as one partner takes the risk of such a disclosure. Subsequent "I love you"s may come frequently and have considerably less impact than the first incidence. So it's the first one we remember. Yet while people presume to understand the phenomenon and its romantic implications, little is really understood about the planful nature of such statements, the functions they may serve in ongoing relationships, or the receiver's response to the declaration. The two studies reported here examine who takes the initiative in saying "I love you," reasons for making that first declaration, and communicative responses to such statements.

Empirical Rationale

A 1986 study by William Owen found that males said "I love you" first in 94% of the cases studied. He formulated four potential reasons for such overwhelming initiative: societal expectations, demand for relational commitment, males' inability

to withhold strongly felt emotions, and women's more finely tuned ability to distinguish among emotions.

First, men have traditionally been expected to take the lead in relationships (e.g. asking for dates, marriage, sex, etc.) Thus, women may hold back from expressing love until after their male partner has indicated willingness to take that communicative step (Dion & Dion, 1985). Second, males may have wanted their partner to commit to the relationship and so expressed love in order to direct the relational trajectory into reciprocation. In the accounts Owen collected these reasons were often expressly stated.

The third possibility is that males are not as capable as females of witholding felt love from the partner. Females have traditionally had the responsibility of relationship maintenance/guardianship, and are taught early to feel and express emotions (Pearson, 1985). In comparison, Rubenstein contends that "In love, women are professionals, men are amateurs." (1983, p.47). One such account exemplifies this lack of control. "I said "I love you" before I knew what I was doing! I don't know, it was like I was someone else or like a dog foaming at the mouth out of control!" (Owen, 1987, p. 20).

Finally, males may say "I love you" first because they cannot distinguish love from other related emotions such as affection, lust, admiration, etc. Women tend to be better able to discriminate emotions and the nonverbal elements associated with various affect states (Abbey, 1982: Hall, 1984: Pearson, 1985). Since males are less familiar with the different degrees

and ranges of emotions, they may identify all of these related emotions as love. In sum, both males and females would be expected to report that the male partner was the one to say "I love you" first in most relationships. However, the utterance of such a crucial statement may have ramifications that go beyond the straightforward study of who said it first.

Knapp (1978) proposed that stages of relationship development and disintegration are sequential and to some extent predictable. Empirical studies have examined such transitional times in relationships more closely by studying the association between self disclosure and attraction (Berg & Archer, 1983), at how termination is accomplished (Cody, 1982; Banks, Altendorf, Greene, & Cody, 1987), how one tests whether a relationship is ready to move from platonic to romantic (Baxter & Wilmot,1985), and what types of events serve to increase uncertainty in a relationship and hence facilitate the decision to disengage or repair (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985).

Sometimes these stages progress with little conscious intent on the part of the two individuals (Berger & Roloff, 1982). But many times the person who takes the first step in changing the direction or tempo of a relationship may ponder that decision for days, weeks, or even months. Owen (1987) focused specifically on the utterance of the first "I love you." as a critical point in a relationship's progression. Consequences of the disclosure such as the non-reciprocation of the emotion, opening the self to ridicule, and the possibility of the relationship advancing to a new and possibly more serious status are all taken into

consideration. The uncertainty of the response and implications of the self disclosure increase the anxiety and subsequent planning of the statement.

Further, the sole reason for saying "I love you" may not simply be to build and strengthen the relationship. It could be used as a test (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) or it could be a deceptive tactic used to achieve some other goal (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1987; Metts & Chronis, 1986; Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984). There may be a variety of reasons why someone chooses to make the declaration at a specific time. Once the words are spoken, they cannot be taken back and they tend to have an impact on the developing relationship (Berg & Archer, 1983; Owen, 1987).

Some researchers have begun investigating influence that specific events have on relationship progress, not just at the immediate occurence but later in the course of events as well. For example, Planalp and Honeycutt (1985) found that many events which increased the level of uncertainty in a relationship also hastened its deterioration. But even quite significant events or surprising disclosures did not always result in relationship t mination. Banks, et.al. (1987) noted that implementation of m y disengagement strategies influenced whether the individuals remained friends after the relationship broke up. Thus it is important to examine why people believe such statements are made in he first place and what is the subsequent impact upon the relationship.

Finally, what kind of communication do people typically

receive in response to their declaration of love? If the goal is to ascertain whether the other feels similarly, then reciprocation of affect would be the anticipated response. However Owen and others have indicated that such straightforward goals are not always the case. In addition, the "words of love" may be framed very differently and result in varying responses. Indeed, it would be overly simplistic to assume that receivers of declarations of love have only one avenue of response.

Thus, two research projects were undertaken to investigate answers to several research questions. The first study centered on question one and sought primarily to replicate Owen's basic findings with a more diverse sample and empirical methodology.

Question 1: Which partner says "I love you" first in romantic dyads?

Methodology

Part of the intent of this project was to assess whether Owen's findings would replicate. Of 92 student diaries collected only 18 were suitable for his purposes in that an initial love declaration had been made during the recording period. Of those 18 diaries, only one included a female saying "I love you" before the male. Thus his sample was extremely limited and his intent exploratory (Graczyk, 1987; Owen, 1987). Thus it was judged desirable to broaden the scope of the phenomena under study, include a larger, more representative sample, and employ empirical methods to examine the event.

Participants and Procedures - Study One

For this study one hundred undergraduate students at a large eastern university were interviewed by the first author (50 males, 50 females). The average person interviewed was between the ages of 18 and 20 and resided in the northeastern part of the U.S. The interview method of "network sampling" was used wherein interviewees were asked to generate names of other individuals who might be interested in participating. (See also Baxter & Bullis, 1986 and Granovetter, 1976, for explanation and use of this sampling technique.) Although use of this technique may not produce an entirely representative sample of college romances, due to the overwhelming consistency of response it is difficult to imagine that the actual trends would be much different from those we obtained.

The interviewer met with participants and asked them to reflect back on a romantic, heterosexual relationship in their life where they could remember the first "I love you" being said. This is a technique which is often used in research on critical events in relationships under the assumptions that "critical events" will be well-remembered (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Participants then answered three questions based on that relationship. They were asked to record their own sex, the sex of the person who said "I love you" and then to discuss why they thought that statement was made. The discussion of the reasons for the declaration was used to focus the direction of the second investigation.

Results - Study One

The results of this interview showed that 82 of the 100 students sampled indicated that the male in the relationship took the initiative in uttering the first "I love you". While 82% is not as overwhelming as the 94% reported by Owen, it clearly substantiates the primary focus: that men tend to state their love before women do in the majority of relationships.

Explanations of why they disclosed first ranged from true expressions of feelings to situational aspects and secondary goals. These focused the additional questions and analyses posed by the second study.

Question 2: What is the rationale for a partner initially saying "I love you"?

Question 3: To what extent is the first "I love you" planned?

Question 4: What is the relational impact of a declaration of love?

Question 5: What types of communicative responses do declarations of love tend to elicit?

Participants and Procedures - Study Two

In the second study 100 undergraduates from basic communication courses and service organizations at the same eastern university were surveyed (39 males, 61 females). Care was taken that those interviewed for the first study were not included in the second sample. Questionnaires were completed during regular meeting sessions with all results to remain anonymous and in no way connected with participants' grades or

standing in the organization.

The questionnaire for the second study included questions using both closed and open-ended format. The first three questions were the same as in the previous study: sex of self, sex of person who said the first "I love you", and reasons for the statement.

The fourth question on the survey addressed the planned nature of the disclosure asking, "If you were the partner who said the first "I love you", how long did you think about saying it before you actually did say it?" Categories of response indicated times from spontaneous to longer than a few months. (See Table 3 for categories and response pattern.)

The next question concerned the relational impact of the disclosure. Respondents were asked to describe in their own terms how that initial "I love you" affected the relationship. In addition the next page of the questionnaire addressed this element in a somewhat different fashion. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale from one to five, the impact of a variety of verbal expressions of love. These included: I love you, I think I'm falling in love with you, I really like you, I am always thinking of you, and it would be easy to fall in love with you. The five statements were randomly ordered on the page to alleviate sequence effects and provided comparisons of various statements disclosing romantic feelings.

Participants were also asked to state their immediate communicative response in an open-ended format. The intent of these descriptive items was to provide information about the

communicative strategies used to handle and respond to statements of love.

All open-ended statements were analyzed using analytic induction techniques common in relational communication (See for example Baxter & Wilmot, 1985 or Planalp & Honeycutt, 1986). Each response was recorded on cards, eliminating exact repetitions, and then sorted into conceptually similar categories by the experimentors. The categories were then implemented as descriptive headings and, using category-descriptions, naive sorters re-sorted the responses into appropriate categories. This empirical technique assures that experimentors are not simply interpreting responses according to their own preconceived notions and thus enhances replicability.

Results - Study Two

In study two 69% of the respondents indicated that males had first said "I love you" in their relationships (See Table 1 for comparisons). Clearly the results of both studies indicate that males take the initiative most often, although not necessarily 94% of the time as reported in Owen's earlier study.

Explanations of why the statement was uttered could reliably be categorized into five main reasons: true feelings, ulterior motives, comfort or support, situational influences, or confusion (See Table 2). Of the 105 responses, 95% could be identified with one of these categories. Coder agreement on category placement exceeded 80%.

51.4% of the respondents felt that the individual had said "I love you" because it was an authentic expression of their

feelings. They believed the statement was a true disclosure of emotions aimed at relationship building. Examples included saying it because of the growing closeness of the relationship, and new feelings that they wanted to share with the other.

On the other hand, 11.4% of the respondents credited the statement with being a strategy to attain some other goal, often sexual in nature. Several respondents admitted to ulterior motives saying they disclosed their love in order to get their partner to go to bed with them. Other examples included expressing their own emotions in order to find out how their partner felt.

A third category of responses indicated that loving statements were often made for the other person's sake or in order to comfort the other (11.4%). This response often seemed less a true expression of feelings than an attempt to support or cheer the partner up during a bad time. For example, one person reported they said that first "I love you" when their partner's grandfather was in the hospital. Samter and Burleson (1984) note such disclosures as attempts to comfort the other and reduce their distress. (Compare the difference between statements of lo spoken because, "I wanted her to know my feelings." versus be use, "She wanted to hear it.")

The fourth category suggested that the timing and atmosphere had a great influence on initially telling the other of ' eir love (16.2%). Sometimes this was in response to an anticipated or real separation. Others mentioned a specific imm diate experience such as a delightful evening at the dance,

the full moon, or having just made love for the first time as the impetus behind the declaration.

The fifth category was earmarked by confusion and spontaneity (9.5%). This seemed the most similar to Owen's statements about being out of control or simply not being able to withhold the expression. Several respondents said they actually did not know why they said "I love you." or that they were at a loss for words and didn't know what else to say. This category of responses seemed considerably less planned than the other responses.

Results of Question 3 concerning the planned nature of the first "I love you," suggest that this is not a statement that people take lightly. Most respondents said they had thought about it for longer than just a few hours (nearly 75%), and the modal response was a few weeks. Thus, while some did attest to the spontaneous nature of that first "I love you" (15%), the actual senders of the message reported giving substantial thought to it prior to disclosing the emotion. (See Table 3 for analysis by categories.)

Question 4 considered the relational impact of disclosing love first. Responses to declarations of love were not universally positive. Although 70% of the responses indicated some sort of improvement in the relationship (e.g. it got stronger, more committed, more open and honest, etc.), 24% of the responses indicated a negative impact or no change in the relationship. Comments such as "we grew apart," it became "chilled and awkward," and it "ended" the relationship suggest

that the disclosure may have been ill-timed or was perceived as a trap by the other.

A few respondents (4-5%) referenced a quick change in the relationship. The statement seemingly intensified whatever was happening in the relationship. For instance comments such as "it sped things up," "we got deep quick," or "we had sex" suggest that saying "I love you" may act as an impetus for relationship progression.

In sum, the first "I love you" in a relationship appears to be a planned disclosure which is generally perceived positively and improves the relationship. However, there are certainly a substantial number of incidences where that declaration "chills" the relationship and changes the relational trajectory toward disengagement.

Table 4 shows the relative impact of the various disclosures of affect. Clearly the direct statement of love had the most credibililty and impact for the recipients. The other statements show descending impact which seems to correspond to their relative immediacy and the conditionality of the statement. If the emotion, love, is mentioned the impact was stronger, attesting to the influence of intense emotion words.

The communicative responses to the various affect statements could reliably be organized into five categories: RECIPROCATION, CLARIFICATION ATTEMPTS, NEGATIVE AFFECT, POSITIVE AFFECT, AND NEUTRAL RESPONSES. Coder agreement was 93% for reciprocation, 90% for clarification, 82% for negative affect, 80% for positive affect, and 67% for neutral statements.

The most common response to the declarations of love was reciprocation of the feeling (49%). Most respondents simply mirrored the source by saying "I love you too," or "I feel the same way." This may have been the path of least resistance (i.e. it may be easier to go along with the emotional stage expressed than to openly disagree [see Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1987 or Camden, et. al., 1984) or it may be that one person taking the lead in any disclosure guides subsequent disclosive responses of the other and results in a matching effect (Berg & Archer, 1983; Shimanoff, 1985). In any event, this type of response communicated commitment to the relationship.

A second consistent pattern appeared to be negative reactions to the disclosed emotion. Nine percent of the receivers registered surprise, shock, and feelings of being trapped resulting in attempts to distance themselves from the relationship. Responses such as "Oh no." or, "I can't believe it," were representative. It should be noted that respondents' statements in this category often seemed to be more covert and were subsequently masked.

A third category was positive affect (14.9% of the statements.) In this type of response people did not communicate reciprocation of the feelings but rather that they felt pleased, happy, honored, etc. that the source felt this way toward them. This category offers positive reinforcement for the person who initiated the disclosure without committing the reciever any further in the relationship.

Some of the responses were attempts at clarification of the disclosure (14.9%). The statements sought additional information from the discloser in order to interpret exactly what was meant. For example, "You mean you're falling in love with me?" or "When did you realize this?" direct subsequent statements into clarification. This could constitute actual desire to understand the emotion or it could provide a stalling action, giving receivers time to consider their own action. In other words, when faced with an unanticipated disclosure we may want to be sure we understand it before we add any disclosure of our own feelings.

The final category consisted of neutral or very cautious responses (9.6%). "Oh, I see" was typical. These clearly were attempts to gain time following an unexpected turn in the relationship. Presumably such responses would be followed up with more substantive communication. (See Table 5 for the percentages of response use by type of declaration of emotions.)

In sum, when confronted with a declaration of affection, receivers seem to have a range of communicative responses. While reciprocation of the emotion was most common, other responses suggest a range of willingness to commit to the relationship.

Discussion

These studies investigated the use of the initial "I love you" as a strategic form of communication in romantic dyads. Overall it was found that a) males tend to predominate in initiating the disclosure, b) that people say "I love you" for several reasons in addition to simply relationship building, c) that this declaration is more often planned than a passionate

outburst, and d) that both the relational impact and communicative responses to declarations of love are subject to a diverse pattern of receiver-reactions.

First, these findings are consistent with earlier writing which indicated the male partner as initiator of new phases of a relationship. Not surprisingly, men are typically the partner to say "I love you" first. This is not to say that the women might not have felt strong emotions just as early as the men, but if they did, they tended to wait until after the male had taken the first step to disclose their own feelings.

Most initiators of that first "I love you" reported contemplating and planning the event. While there were a variety of circumstances which may have acted as a trigger for the actual disclosure (e.g. a personal crisis, a romantic evening) it appears that most had already formulated the thought in their mind. Thus, based on this data and contrary to Owens' reports, the first declaration of love is seldom a spontaneous, uncontrollable outburst.

This declaration might more appropriately be viewed as a communication strategy designed to accomplish the source's intended goal at the time. Often this goal was to enhance relational commitment, to express how deeply the person felt, but it was also sometimes used to comfort the partner. We may surmise that the timing of this important disclosure used as a comforting strategy, served to distract the partner from the crisis at hand and reassure them of the other's concern.

The initial "I love you" is also perceived as a strategy to

get the partner to do something else. In this sense it can be viewed as a compliance-gaining tactic. Because society has imbued the phrase with almost mythical relationship importance, if the source says "I love you" the receiver is likely to capitulate and agree to go along with the source's interaction goals (e.g. cheat on a test, sleep with them, or even marry them.)

In terms of relational impact these studies show that a) impact of the first "I love you" is usually, but not always, positive for the relationship, and b) that different expressions of the sentiment carry differing weights with the receiver. First, even though interactants may perceive a variety of reasons for the initial disclosure of love, in general the disclosure appears to have a positive effect on the relationship. Seventy percent of the partners reported that the relationship improved in some way following a disclosure of love. However, the specific words, "I love you" had the most influence. Less intense statements of affection such as "I REALLY like you" or "It would be easy to fall in love with you" had considerably less impact. It should also be noted that the less immediate the s[illegible]ements of affection were, the more diverse and less r[illegible]procating the communicative responses became. Another informative direction for research would be to examine the attributions people make about the declaration and the impact th[illegible] attributional pattern has on subsequent response and relational impact.

In general communicative responses tended to reciprocate the

emotion disclosed (49%). This may indicate that receivers had also been contemplating the disclosure but hadn't found the appropriate time or they were holding back waiting for the partner to disclose first. The high reciprocation rate may also reflect the high social demand for reciprocation and a desire to allow the other to save face, even when receivers did not truly feel the same. Hence, it may be easier to go along with the emotional flow rather than to admit you don't feel similarly and, by doing so, avoid confrontation. Camden, Motley, and Wilson (1984) discuss such reasoning for the use of "white lies" in interactions. Future research might explore such lines of reasoning and the extent to which "I love you" may be used specifically as a deceptive tactic.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from these studies remain limited in several ways. First, these responses represent only one viewpoint from the relationship. It would be useful to question ongoing relationship partners to ascertain the degree to which they agree or disagree concerning the communication of the first "I love you." This also brings up a second area of concern with these studies.

The use of recall of critical events in relationships may lead to distortion in memory for details (Berger & Roloff, 1982). In both studies there was a range of elapsed time since the critical phrases had been uttered. Thus it may be preferable to investigate such disclosures in ongoing relationships.

On the other hand, people who are undergoing relational

change may also exhibit biased perceptions of what occurs as well (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). They are the actors undergoing this emotional upheaval. In addition, it is difficult to anticipate when the critical phrases may be disclosed which makes data collection tenuous (note Owens, 1987). Certainly it would be desireable to have accounts of ongoing relationships in which love was disclosed for more immediate comparisons of explanations, planning, and responses.

As with many empirical studies it may be difficult to generalize from college student romances to older adult populations. College students may be more free-thinking and assertive than the average individual. They may fall in and out of love more quickly and the nature of their relationships may be more transient than older samples. Thus they may credit less importance to the first declaration of love. However it may be this very relational turn-over which adds credibility to the reports because the disclosure would tend to be more recent. Older individuals in established relationships may have to reach further back in their memory for the first "I love you" and may have many subsequent declarations to cloud the recall. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to examine the attributions they make about those loving statements as well.

Even taking these limitations into account, several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, for a variety of reasons men still take the initiative in declaring their love. Although women may be aware of the emotions, they do not tend to be the first to say "I love you." Thus they tend to

enact the role of respondent to such disclosures.

Second, most people believe that declaring their love had a positive impact on the relationship. Whether the source used the disclosure as a strategic communication tactic to achieve goals of personal expression, comforting, or to achieve a secondary gain for themselves, saying "I love you" tended to enhance the relationship. However, a substantial portion indicated that the disclosure had negative repercussions on the relationship as well.

Responses to such disclosures tended overwhelmingly to be reciprocated. While some receivers expressed negativity, pleasant affect without further commitment, a need to clarify the declaration, or noncommital responses to avoid direct answers, most simply went along with the source's stated emotion by reflecting similar feelings. Given this pattern, it is not difficult to see why most participants felt that the impact on the relationship was positive. Based on these reports, it seems that there is little to lose by telling a relational partner that you love them.

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Table 1

Initiator of the First "I Love You"

Study	Male Initiated	Female Initiated
Owen (1987)	94%	6%
Study One	82%	18%
Study Two	69%	31%

Table 2

Reasons For Initial Disclosure of Love

Category	Percent	Number of Responses
True Feelings	51.4	54
Ulterior Motives	11.4	12
Comfort/Support	11.4	12
Situational Influences	16.2	17
Confusion	9.5	10

Table 3

Planning Time for First "I Love You"

Time	Percent	Number of Responses
Spontaneous	15.4	6
A Few Minutes	10.2	4
A Few Hours	8.0	3
A Few Days	20.5	8
A Few Weeks	23.1	9
A Few Months	20.5	8
Longer	2.6	1

n = 39

Table 4

Relative Impact of Statements of Affection

Statement	Mean Rating	SD
"I love you"	4.63	.691
"I think I'm falling in love with you"	4.17	.911
"I am always thinking of you"	3.94	.962
"I REALLY like you"	3.59	.842
"It would be easy to fall in love with you"	3.35	1.038

Table 5

Responses to Emotional Disclosures

Type of Disclosure	Percent RECIP	NEG	CLARIFY	POS	NEUT
I love you.	61.8	7.2	9.0	10.9	12.7
I think I'm falling in love with you.	25.4	12.7	23.6	20.0	9.1
I'm always thinking about you.	60.4	4.2	8.3	20.8	4.2
I REALLY like you.	70.3	7.8	3.1	14.1	4.7
It would be easy to fall in love with you.	19.6	13.0	30.4	8.7	17.4